

# SECONDARY TRAUMA AND THE MANAGEMENT OF SEX OFFENDERS: A Training Curriculum

Time Allotment: 2 hours and 30 minutes



## **TOPIC: ADDRESSING SECONDARY TRAUMA IN THE MANAGEMENT OF SEX OFFENDERS**

(30 minutes, including Learning Activity)

### **Introduction**

All professionals involved in sex offender management can probably benefit from learning approaches and strategies to protect themselves from being overwhelmed and traumatized by this work. We are now going to discuss some techniques that you—and your agencies—can employ to mitigate the hardships associated with the work that you do. We will highlight a few approaches that agencies in this field have found helpful in managing secondary trauma and burnout among their employees, as well as a few fun and basic tips that you can try on your own.

### **“Trauma Resilient” Employees**

The notion of being a “trauma resilient” employee centers around your own individual ability to both recognize *when* you might be experiencing secondary trauma and *how* to take the steps necessary to further protect yourself from—or overcome—it. Since we have already discussed the likelihood that at some point in time, you may be impacted very seriously by this work, it is in your best interest to think about what you can do to help ward off the effects of secondary trauma. The concept of being trauma resilient acknowledges that managing sex offenders can be incredibly difficult and emotionally taxing, but also recognizes that there are steps individuals can take to reduce the effects of secondary trauma and burnout. Before you leave today, I hope that you can identify three or more self-care strategies that you can use to become more trauma resilient.

### **Self-Care Strategies**

A 2005 study on community supervision and burnout looked at how supervision officers who have sustained high levels of professional performance and personal health manage the stressors of their work.<sup>1</sup> Before I tell you what they were, here are some negative things that people shared about their work. I bet that you all will be able to relate to these: “Most probation officers’ lives are kind of chaotic due to the size of our caseloads and the nature of who we have to deal with. It’s hard not to reduce everything to self-preservation, routing people without getting in-depth, just to survive. On a personal level, I think most officers stay pretty

➤ **Use Slide #1: Title Slide**

➤ **Use Slide #2: “Trauma Resilient” Employees**

**Note:** *Share one or two of the quotes from the supervision officers detailed in the text. Ask participants for their reactions and facilitate their responses.*

**Note to trainers:** The studies presented here are not sex offender specific, but are certainly generalizable to those who work with sex offenders.

closed up—like police officers. What do you do—go home and tell your wife or husband about the child abusers and rapists you saw in the office today? It's difficult for officers not to carry their work home, and yet difficult not to be able to talk about it there."<sup>2</sup>

"In small communities, we are all interconnected. It brings a different kind of accountability. You can't just go home and forget about it because your neighbors are the people on your caseload or know your clients."<sup>3</sup>

"You feel intense pressure because you have such a responsibility to the community. These high-risk offenders pose such a potential threat to public safety that you feel pressure to find the right treatment for this person and to make sure that they're getting something out of it."<sup>4</sup>

While many respondents acknowledged the difficulty of the work, they also found some ways to protect themselves from secondary trauma. In fact, those who reported performing well on the job shared many common characteristics, including:

- Flexibility;
- Technical competence;
- Self-confidence;
- Empathy;
- Patience;
- Integrity;
- Honesty; and
- Humor.<sup>5</sup>

As we will discuss, these traits will likely serve you well in reducing the level of secondary trauma you experience. While it is unlikely that any single thing can completely erase all of the potential for emotional and physical tolls associated with your job, employing some proactive strategies to manage the stress will likely be beneficial to your sense of job satisfaction and overall well-being.

#### *Common Ways to Reduce the Impact of Secondary Trauma*

Let's take a look at some of the examples of these strategies. In the 2005 study described below, each respondent was asked to rate the items in a list of common professional self-care strategies based on each strategy's degree of importance in helping to maintain the individual's physical and mental health and high job performance. The rating options were 1 (not important), 2 (important), or 3 (very important). The average ratings for the 17 items are displayed in the table below.

➤ **Use Slide #3:  
Characteristics of Trauma  
Resilient Employees**

➤ **Use Slides #4–7:  
Professional Self-Care  
Strategies**

Professional Self-Care Strategies	
Average Rating	Stress Reducing Activity
2.9	Cultivating a sense of humor
2.9	Having healthy intimate and family relationships
2.7	Having one or more healthy relationships at work in which I can express emotions related to my work experience
2.7	Having enjoyable hobbies or leisure activities
2.6	Maintaining relationships with professional peers who work outside the criminal justice system
2.6	Having one or more close friendships away from work in which I can express my emotions related to my work experience
2.6	Avoiding or self-monitoring potentially harmful approaches to stress management (e.g., smoking, drinking, risk-taking, cynicism, and negativity)
2.5	Physical self-care (e.g., healthy diet, regular physical checkups, etc.)
2.5	Attending professional training
2.4	Cultivating relationships with other supervision officers who have a positive attitude
2.4	Having alone-time rituals that keep me focused (e.g., meditation, prayer, self-reflection, etc.)
2.4	Getting regular exercise
2.1	Maintaining relationships with supervision officers who work in other offices
1.9	Daily goal-setting and/or self-evaluation at end of the day
1.9	Having one or more professional mentors
1.9	Doing volunteer work unrelated to my job
1.7	Using particular stress management techniques (e.g., biofeedback, meditation, progressive relaxation, etc.)



Are there others not on the list that you have found to be helpful coping strategies? What did you think about these strategies? Did any of these resonate with you?

A similar study was funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) that examined stress among supervision officers.<sup>6</sup> In the published findings, officers cited a range of methods to cope with work stress. Officers cited physical exercise as their primary coping technique for dealing with work stress. Other methods used to reduce stress included discussing cases with fellow officers, seeking support through spirituality, “venting,” and talking to family members.<sup>7</sup>

In the NIJ study, several supervision officers also noted that they made a practice of seeking out activities and interactions that reaffirm the

**Use Slides #8–9: Other Self-Care Ideas**

*Note to Trainers: Facilitate participants’ responses or be prepared to share their own self-care strategies if needed in order to stimulate discussion.*

existence of goodness and decency as a sort of antidote to the difficult work of managing sex offenders. As one officer commented, "I really push myself to spend time with the good people in the community. If you're dealing with people who are criminals during your workday, some part of the rest of your time needs to be spent with pro-social people. I think that helps me to keep aware of the fact that most people in the community are decent. To keep from getting cynical and jaded, I have to do things that prove that to myself."<sup>8</sup>

Still other officers shared that when they recognize that they're feeling distressed, they utilize a wide variety of quick decompression rituals that range from short time-out periods (such as getting outside; taking a brief walk; positive self-talk; or emotional self-expression to peers, a supervisor, or family and friends) to more extended breaks from the work environment.<sup>9</sup>

Yet another study, focusing on rape victim advocates, found that all of the experienced advocates surveyed used some form of self-care strategies to regulate the negative or stressful aspects of working with victims. Many of these strategies echo what supervision officers outlined above, including exercise, taking up hobbies, talking with others, and seeking therapy for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

It is nice to see that there is some literature from the general criminal justice field that we can draw upon in order to think about self-care strategies for ourselves. In addition to these strategies, some other basic techniques you might find helpful in preventing or managing secondary trauma are described below:<sup>11</sup>

- Be creative—take an art or cooking class.
- Get away—take vacations on the beach or in the mountains, and don't combine them with professional conferences. Enjoy other environments—keep a fish tank in your office, fly kites, go sailing, and go fishing (not in the fish tank!), or look at the stars.
- Appreciate the weather—, make a snowman, or sing in the rain.
- Have fun— go bowling, go shopping, or go see a movie.
- Have more fun—exercise for fun, play softball or basketball.
- Read—read for fun, read to others, or teach others to read.
- Enjoy children—yours, others', and the kid part of you.
- Have even more fun—listen to music, go dancing, or pet your dog.
- Laugh often—don't take yourself too seriously.

In mitigating the effects of secondary trauma, however you choose to do so, remember to listen to feedback from colleagues, friends, and family members. They will usually notice the impact of secondary trauma and stress in you before you do yourself. When they bring things to your attention, remember that they care about you! Obviously, there will be many times when you are not in a position to be able to simply leave the office or have more than a few minutes between clients, but there are still techniques you can use to lessen your stress. Take whatever time—no

matter how short—to try one or some of the techniques identified above. Find out what works for you and stick to a plan to continually care for yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally throughout the day. One way to continually remind yourself to do this is to create a self-care list of the strategies that you've learned work best for you and post it prominently in your home, car, or office—somewhere you will regularly see it and be continually reminded of how important it is to take care of yourself.<sup>12</sup> Additional tips and strategies on how to do that, as well as other examples of activities you might include on your self-care list, are described on a handout included with your training materials.

### **What You Can Do On the Job**

Two other basic techniques that you can utilize on the job in order to reduce stress are “compartmentalization” and maintaining clear boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Compartmentalization*

Experienced practitioners advise that to work with sex offenders, it is important to “compartmentalize” oneself to some degree. Offenders have often engaged in unspeakable behavior that has created life-altering trauma for their victims. Their behavior can be so far beyond the boundaries of civilized human interaction that we are naturally appalled. In the words of a seasoned parole officer who has supervised sex offenders for many years, practitioners who work with sex offenders must deal with these offenders “in a nonjudgmental way. You have to temporarily suspend your judgment and shock aside the normal revulsion that we might have for these offenders' behavior.”<sup>14</sup> This may seem counter to an individual's sense of right and wrong, but practitioners emphasize that it is necessary to suspend judgment to some degree in order to allow oneself to function effectively in this line of work. Suspending judgment of the *person* does not mean losing sight of the fact that the *person's behavior* is not acceptable, is illegal, and is harmful to victims.

#### *Setting and Maintaining Boundaries*

Setting and maintaining boundaries is also a critical component of protecting your professional and personal self when working with sex offenders. Sometimes we may begin to shoulder our clients' burdens. Although we know that we shouldn't, we will emotionally take our clients home with us, so to speak. Even if we aren't consciously thinking about them, they are often sitting right next to us on the couch as we try to forget about our day. Setting boundaries for ourselves can help to alleviate this.

For example, some sex offenders may attempt to create inappropriate relationships with those who work with them. They may offer flattering comments, attempt to play an empathic role with you, offer gifts, notes, or letters; ask about our personal or family life; or try to establish themselves as “special.” Strategies that some report that they use to combat

**Refer to Handout: The ABCs of Managing Secondary Trauma—Awareness, Balance, and Connection**

➤ **Use Slides #10–11: Compartmentalization**

offenders' attempts to manipulate their personal and professional boundaries include: not keeping personal items (e.g., photographs, certificates, souvenirs, etc.) in their offices; not divulging information about themselves or their families in the context of a meeting with an offender; declining gifts and correspondence, emphasizing that they are inappropriate; and not letting small behaviors go unaddressed, responding to attempts at manipulation or deceit—no matter how small or insignificant—with such statements as, "this is what you seem to be attempting to do and it is not appropriate because...." In addition, some professionals arrange their offices in such a way as to create a neutral space between their desk and the chair in which offenders sit during office visits.<sup>15</sup>

One last, very important—one that cannot be emphasized enough—is to try your best to leave your work *at work and maintain balance with your personal life*. Maintaining work boundaries means you doing things like not taking on more than you can do, working only your assigned hours, and limiting calls from people that aren't totally necessary. When you leave your office for the day, try to leave with it all of the happenings of the day, any stress or frustration you might have felt, and any unfinished tasks that might linger.

### **Trauma Resilient Agencies**

The effects of secondary trauma do not stop at the individual level. Secondary trauma can also impact our agencies,<sup>16</sup> manifesting itself in the form of low employee morale and high staff turnover, organizational conflict, and decreased productivity and effectiveness. This doesn't necessarily have to be the case; in fact, just as we discussed the notion of trauma resilient employees earlier, agencies can become trauma resilient as well. Agency leaders and policymakers should work to create an environment that is as supportive as possible and take proactive steps to preserve the emotional and psychological welfare of front line professionals. A failure to do so is likely to result in a reduction of the number of staff who are willing and qualified to do this kind of work.<sup>17</sup> The following are strategies that can be used by agencies to become more trauma resilient and to mitigate the hardships associated with supervising sex offenders for their staff.

- *Provide specialized sex offender management training that includes a component on secondary trauma.* One part of the remedy for secondary trauma is ensuring that those who are responsible for this work possess the specialized knowledge required to support it and the skills necessary to undertake it successfully. The provision of comprehensive, specialized training is, therefore, essential. Agency heads, policymakers, and mid-level managers need specialized training on sex offender management so that they can support agency policies and practices that reflect contemporary knowledge, research, and literature. It's obvious why line level staff require it—as you know, some sex offenders are different than other types of offenders and specialized

➤ **Use Slides 12–13: Setting and Maintaining Boundaries**

➤ **Use Slide #14: “Trauma Resilient” Agencies**

training provides line staff with the capacity to respond to their unique needs and risks. A component of the specialized training provided to line staff and managers should focus on secondary trauma. Staff should be equipped to reconcile the signs or indicators of secondary trauma in themselves and their colleagues, and be encouraged and empowered by their agencies to take an active role in addressing them. This can reduce the likelihood that staff will use unhealthy coping skills.

- *Establish clear boundaries.* Managers should support employees in their efforts to sustain a balance between their personal and professional lives by doing things like assigning them workable caseloads, modeling a 40-hour workweek whenever possible, and encouraging employees to take regularly scheduled vacations.
- *Create a safe forum for “venting.”* Agencies should create an emotionally safe environment for staff to discuss the emotional and psychological challenges inherent in our work, frustrating interactions with sex offenders, coworkers, or colleagues—or even interactions with personal friends and family members related to our work, and personal feelings around sexual assault, trauma, and sex offender management. The ability to talk about our feelings and experiences with others will reduce isolation among workers and can minimize the overall effects of secondary trauma. Agencies can help in this regard by providing a regularly scheduled outlet for debriefing (e.g., as a regular part of weekly staff meetings).
- *Make clear that an offender’s failure does not reflect an employee’s failure.* Supportive agencies and management teams must emphasize that a client’s failure is not your failure.<sup>18</sup> We have already acknowledged the immense responsibility we feel as professionals who manage sex offenders in the community to create and maintain public safety. While honorable, this sentiment is unrealistic. We are simply bound to work with perpetrators who reoffend, or violate probation and parole, or fail in treatment. Conducting post-mortem case reviews are helpful to help us look at what we might have done better in a particular case, but we need to remember that offenders make and are responsible for their own choices
- *Promote inter- and cross-agency collaboration.* No one agency can effectively manage sex offenders in the community. Supervision agencies, those who provide treatment and assessment, victim advocates, the judiciary, and others should work together collaboratively in the interest of promoting public safety and preventing additional victimization. Establishing strong collaborative partnerships will help to make clear that no one person—or agency—can be wholly responsible—or burdened by—the enormous task of sex offender management.
- *Encourage flexible office policies.* Agencies can further optimize the performance and health of their employees by encouraging flexible and supportive office policies (e.g., flexibility in assignments, flex time, and recognizing the importance of “mental health” days as a part of sick leave), supporting team-building, and providing of quality supervision.
- *Promote employee wellness within the agency.* Another strategy that agencies can employ to mitigate the effects of secondary trauma is to

➤ **Use Slides #15–16: How Agencies Can Be Trauma Resilient**

establish a stress reduction program within the agency. Research has found that agencies can gain major benefits from the implementation of a stress reduction program. Preliminary data suggest that these programs are promising in preventing and treating stress.<sup>19</sup> Some of these programs contract with outside providers, while others train peer supporters to help their coworkers. Programs may offer counseling, provide training in relaxation exercises, or facilitate physical exercise. Research examining the effectiveness of these programs showed reductions in physical and psychological stress.<sup>20</sup> At a minimum, agencies should maintain a list of professionals from whom their employees can seek help in coping with secondary trauma issues.



Can you give me an example of an agency or organization that you worked for that took steps to address overall wellness or secondary trauma and burnout? Was it helpful? What additional thoughts do you have about how your agency could be more helpful in mitigating the effects of secondary trauma on you and your colleagues?



### **Learning Activity: Next Steps in Responding to Secondary Trauma**

Being aware of what you need in order to take care of yourself in this work is an important step in responding to secondary trauma. Please turn to the handout entitled “Next Steps in Responding to Secondary Trauma.” Take a moment to reflect on the training and consider your own experience of the impact of your work on you personally and professionally.

I would like each of you to write down a list of self-care strategies—things that you can do to take better care of yourself, and that can help to offset the effects of secondary trauma. List three strategies you can employ in your personal life. Then list three strategies you can use in your professional life. Finally, consider three strategies that would be helpful for your agency to pursue in order to better support you in doing this work. Take about ten minutes to complete this exercise, and then we will have a group discussion.

Of course, working with sex offenders isn’t all bad—otherwise you wouldn’t be sitting here today, immersed in this important work. Much about the job is immensely rewarding and our work undoubtedly adds value to our profession and to our community.

So now, I want you to take five minutes and consider what personal satisfactions you derive as a result of doing this work.

### **Conclusion**

The self-care techniques and strategies that we have discussed in this

### **Refer to Handout: Next Steps in Responding to Secondary Trauma**

***Note:** Allow several of the participants who are willing to share their story with the group to do so. Facilitate any necessary processing of participant reactions or responses. Be willing to share your own stories if there is limited participation from the audience.*

***Note:** After participants have recorded their self-care strategies on the provided handout, facilitate a discussion about self-care strategies from participants’ lists. Invite participants to share with the group one activity or idea they plan to implement in any of the three areas about which they were asked to brainstorm. This can serve to inspire new ideas for participants from others in the group, and send people away with a sense of accomplishment. Provide*

training for the prevention and management of secondary trauma, whether employed by individuals, the organizations for which they work, or the teams on which they participate, will likely lead to a healthier work environment, a higher and more consistent quality of sex offender management, and more enhanced, healthy lives for everyone.

As professionals who work with sex offenders, we need to be diligent about taking care of ourselves. I am not suggesting that following the steps we have talked about in this section will alleviate *all* of the stress associated with your job—unfortunately that just is not possible! But failing to take care of yourself is very likely to result in your experiencing heightened effects of secondary trauma. Recognizing—and taking steps to interrupt—the signs and symptoms of secondary trauma in ourselves, our colleagues, and our agencies is critical to our ability to preserve our health and to do our jobs effectively. However, we can't do it alone. We should expect—and encourage—our bosses/supervisors and agencies to implement some of the steps outlined in this section to help to support us as we do this work.

*positive feedback in response to their ideas and encourage people to add to their existing list some of the suggestions that other participants come up with. Encourage participants to keep their list and post it somewhere they will see it on a regular basis, so they do not lose sight of or signs of secondary trauma or burnout or ideas about how to combat them.*

*After participants have considered the benefits of working with sex offenders, ask if anyone would like to share some of their job satisfactions. Note that this is very personal and sharing is totally voluntary. If some participants share, provide positive feedback. Do not be discouraged if no one speaks up. Perhaps you can share some of your own gains as a summary for this exercise.*

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<sup>1</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>2</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>3</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>4</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

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<sup>5</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>6</sup> Abt Associates, Inc. (2005). *Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It: Research for Practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

<sup>7</sup> Abt Associates, Inc. (2005). *Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It: Research for Practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

<sup>8</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>9</sup> White, W., Gasperin, D., Nystrom, J., Ambrose, T., & Esarey, C. (2005). The Other Side of Burnout: Exemplary Performance and Health Among Probation Officers. *Perspectives: The Journal of the American Probation and Parole Association*, 29(2), 26–31.

<sup>10</sup> Wasco, S. & Campbell, R. (2002). A Multiple Case Study of Rape Victim Advocates' Self Care Routines: The Influence of Organizational Context. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(5), 731–760.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Pullen, C. & Pullen, S. (1996). Secondary Trauma Associated with Managing Sex Offenders. In K. English, S. Pullen, & L. Jones (Eds.), *Managing Adult Sex Offenders on Probation and Parole: A Containment Approach*. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association, 10-1–10-11.

<sup>12</sup> Center for Sex Offender Management. (2002). *Supervision of Sex Offenders in the Community: A Training Curriculum*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.

<sup>13</sup> Center for Sex Offender Management. (2002). *Supervision of Sex Offenders in the Community: A Training Curriculum*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.

<sup>14</sup> Center for Sex Offender Management. (2002). *Supervision of Sex Offenders in the Community: A Training Curriculum*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.

<sup>15</sup> Center for Sex Offender Management. (2002). *Supervision of Sex Offenders in the Community: A Training Curriculum*. Silver Spring, MD: Author.

<sup>16</sup> Saakvitne, K. & Pearlman, L. (1996). *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization for Helping Professionals who Work with Traumatized Clients*. New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

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<sup>17</sup> Cumming, G. & McGrath, R. (2005). *Supervision of the Sex Offender: Community Management, Risk Assessment & Treatment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Brandon, VT: The Safer Society Press.

<sup>18</sup> Pullen, C. & Pullen, S. (1996). Secondary Trauma Associated with Managing Sex Offenders. In K. English, S. Pullen, & L. Jones (Eds.), *Managing Adult Sex Offenders on Probation and Parole: A Containment Approach*. Lexington, KY: American Probation and Parole Association, 10-1–10-11.

<sup>19</sup> Abt Associates, Inc. (2005). *Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It: Research for Practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.

<sup>20</sup> Abt Associates, Inc. (2005). *Stress Among Probation and Parole Officers and What Can Be Done About It: Research for Practice*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice.